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from the President's Pen

Mind the Gaps

If you have ever traveled in London, or any other major European city for that matter, you are probably familiar with the recurring call as you alight from a subway car. Riders of the London Underground are reminded to “mind the gap” between train door and platform so they may avoid injury. For decades, the education leaders in the United States have heard that same resounding call: to mind the gap of student achievement. State boards of education have been laser focused on the gaps among subgroups since the early 1970s. Yet there has been little success in actually closing them.

Achievement gaps occur when one group of students (e.g., grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (i.e., larger than the margin of error). White-black and white-Hispanic achievement gaps narrowed substantially in all grades and in math and reading in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s but then stalled. Some of the gaps even grew larger in the late 1980s and the 1990s. The most recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that, with scant exceptions, achievement gaps in every grade and subject continue to grow despite the Herculean efforts of states, districts, and schools.

Even though our past efforts may not show the desired results, minding the achievement gap remains a moral imperative for all state boards. However, it is time to stop talking about a single achievement gap and start talking about

the myriad subgaps under that umbrella. The larger achievement gap comprises several access and opportunity subgaps: access to high-quality teachers, access to rigorous curriculum, access to technology, access to early learning, access to counseling services, access to appropriate health care, access to extended day/year programs, opportunity to attend schools with diverse teachers and leaders, opportunity to engage with peers in project-based learning...and the list goes on.

We need not abandon the many excellent strategies used to close the achievement gap—setting benchmarks and tracking progress and personalizing learning, for example. Rather, we ought to take a strategic look at the many access and opportunity gaps that exist and strategically align resources and interventions in each of those areas. What state-level policies within your purview can address the many subgaps listed above? Does your board's strategic plan address each? What data are you reviewing to monitor your progress on these objectives? How are you, as state policy leaders, holding yourselves accountable for addressing these widespread disparities?

Until we mind the many subgaps and fissures that bedevil our complex educational system, we will not close the larger achievement gap that looms in front of the majority of our students. Are you minding the right gaps? Where are the access and opportunity gaps that you need to bridge in your state? ■